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ABSTRACT

A survey of 16 major United States Corporations was conducted to determine how speeches by senior executives are used to publicize the corporations' views on business matters and public affairs. This paper reports the survey results in the following areas: number of full- and part-time speech writers employed by the corporations; backgrounds and salaries of the speech writers; methods for developing speeches when speech writers are not used; selection of speech topics; the process used to get speeches researched, written, and approved; and practices regarding the giving of speeches by senior executives. (GW)

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PUBLIC INFORMATION TELEPHONE SURVEY

Survey Report

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SURVEY REPORT

Public Information Telephone Survey

I. Introduction

In January and February, 1977, the Public Relations Department of Sears, Roebuck and Co. conducted a survey of sixteen major American corporations to see how they used speeches by senior executives to publicize their views on business and public affairs matters.

The survey was conducted after inquiries at the Conference Board and the Public Relations Society of America revealed that little definitive information on the subject existed.

Of the sixteen companies in the original sample, fourteen agreed to answer the survey questions. One declined to respond and another was eliminated because of recent changes in top management.

The companies participating in the survey were picked by Sears director of public relations from among the fifty largest industrial corporations ranked by sales. Energy, chemical, consumer products, automotive, primary metals, business services and machinery companies were in the sample. No firm in the sample had annual sales of less than $4 billion.

II. Survey Results

1. Does your company employ writers whose work is restricted solely to speech writing or other directly related activites?

Of the fourteen firms, twelve reported one or more full-time speech writers while the remaining two said they do not employ full-time speech writers.

The two firms without full-time speech writers each have one part-time writer, one in the employ of the company and the other a free-lance writer who devotes about half time to writing assignments for the firm.

Of the twelve firms, two reported they had one full-time speech writer, three reported two full-time writers, one had three, two had four, two had five and one had seven full-time speech writers. Another firm simply stated it had more than one full-time writer without giving the exact number.

In addition, two of the firms with full-time speech writers also reported they had part-timers. One firm with two full-time writers reported it had the equivalent of four full-time writers. Part-timers effectively doubled the speech writing staff of the other firm, from one to two, the company reported.

Most of the speech writers report to executives in the public relations/public affairs department. Titles of their supervisors range from "senior advisor, writing" and "director of speech-writing department" to "manager of public relations", "vice president of public relations", "director of public relations staff", and "director of creative writing services".

All the full-time speech writers are college graduates and virtually all have had working experience with news gathering organizations, primarily newspapers. One respondent, for example, noted his firm frequently hires editorial page writers as speech writers. Only two of the twelve reported their writers had advertising or public relations agency experience.

It is difficult to generalize about the length of company service of speech writers. While a majority of the companies reported that most of their writers had been in their employ more than five years (seven out of twelve), the actual length of service ranged from "fairly new" to more than twenty-five years.

2. What is the total annual compensation of your full-time speech writers?

Seventeen speech writers employed by five of the twelve firms earn between $40,000 and $50,000 annually, the largest number of writers in any of the salary ranges in the survey.

No firm reported that its speech writers earned less than $20,000 annually, and only one reported that four of its five writers were in the $20,000 to $30,000 range.

Three firms with five writers said their range was $20,000 to $40,000, while another three companies with eight writers reported a range of $30,000 up to or more than $50,000. One firm reported it had a speech writer earning more than $50,000 annually.

3. If you do not have full-time speech writers, how does your company handle speech writing for its senior executives?

One of the two firms without full-time speech writers reported "heavy involvement by management" in the speech writing function.

The other firm, which employed the free-lance writer mentioned earlier, said the writer had over the years developed a rapport with the CEO which enabled him to write the CEO's most important public-affairs talks with little difficulty.

4. Do your senior executives ever write their own speeches?

Responses varied from "never" or "virtually never" for three of the firms and "seldom" or rarely" for three others to "a few do" for five companies and "yes" for the others.

Commenting on the role of executives in the preparation of their own speeches, one firm noted that their senior executives may prepare their own speeches when they discuss technical matters. Personal preferences also play a role, another observed.

In general, speech writing appears to be a delegated function the higher the executive is in the corporate management, with few CEO's writing their own speeches except out of personal preference.

5. Does your company ever hire outside counsel -- such as an advertising or public relations firm -- to develop speeches?

Eight of the fourteen firms in the survey "never" hire outside counsel to assist in speech writing, and another two "rarely" do. The remaining four firms do hire outside counsel from time to time.

Expressing opposition to a policy of hiring outside counsel, one respondent said, "you have to spend most of the time explaining the company's point of view."

6. What kind of screening process is used to decide whether a senior executive should accept a public-speaking appearance?

Responses varied from "little or no screening" reported by one firm to highly organized screening processes reported by others. Firms that reported a careful screening process consider questions like these:

---How often has the executive been making public appearances?

---Does the company have a message it wishes to convey to the general public or the organization requesting a speaker?

---What is the quality of the organization or its audience?

---How does the company's speaker fit on the program? Will he or she be the main or a subordinate speaker?

---Is media coverage expected? Will there be questions and answers?

---Is there adequate preparation time?

---Is the company and the senior executive competent to speak on the topic of the speech?

Screening usually is handled by the public relations/public affairs department. The department, in turn, may counsel with other company departments in making a recommendation.

7. How are speech topics selected?

Responses to this question fell into four major categories, with no clear preference emerging. Speech topic selection is based on:

---The communications or public affairs objectives of the firm or issues of current concern to the company;

---Public relations/public affairs staff recommendations;

---Requests of or the interests of the organization seeking a speaker;

---The personal decision of the executive invited to speak.

Several of the firms in the survey reported that several or all of these factors are considered in each decision.

8. Briefly describe the process which is used to get speeches researched, written and approved.

The process varied widely among the fourteen firms, ranging from the highly informal to the highly structured. In general, the role of the speech writer, and his relationship with the speaker, is pivotal, along with technical assistance from others in the company both in supplying information and in checking speech drafts for factual accuracy and conformity to company policy.

There was no agreement among the firms on the need for speech outlines, although four noted their speech writers do often prepare them. Formal library research and literature searches, though mentioned, are not universally undertaken.

The most frequently mentioned technique in the speech development process was the checking with other experts in the company. This technique was specifically mentioned by ten of the firms.

One firm handles the process of speech development through the creation of speech task forces which are headed by the assigned writers. This firm also requires its task forces to approve the most sensitive speeches it has developed for its CEO.

9. Does your company ever actively seek speaking opportunities for your senior executives?

Ten of the firms in the survey said they do actively seek speaking opportunities for their senior executives, while four said they do not. Of the four that do not, two do not have full-time speech writers.

The ten companies which seek speaking opportunities, however, do not necessarily pursue the matter aggressively. Most noted they have more speaking requests than they can handle and, in fact, usually choose between existing invitations.

10. Do senior executives in your company regularly deliver speeches outlining your company's views on current public affairs issues?

Twelve of the fourteen firms said senior executives of their firms regularly do deliver speeches giving the company's views. Only two said they do not do so. Among the most frequently mentioned topics on which the companies have developed views: business ethics....the role of multinational corporations....divestitute....need for national energy policies....need for capital formation and investment.... government regulation of business.

III. Summary

Most of the fourteen large firms in this survey use professionally written speeches by senior company executives to present their views on business and public-affairs issues. The speeches usually are written by full-time speech writers who report through the public relations/public affairs departments.

The speech writers earn annual salaries ranging from about $20,000 to $25,000 up to more than $50,000, with more in the $40,000 to $50,000 range than any of the other ranges listed in the survey.

The professional speech writers are, without exception, college graduates, usually with more than five years of service with their firms who have worked for news gathering organizations, usually newspapers, before assuming their present duties.

Although the fourteen firms make heavy use of professionally written speeches, they differ widely in the way they organize and control the speech-writing function. Some companies have well developed, rather formal mechanisms, while others are primarily responsive to the personal preferences of their CEO's.

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